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NRCS Announces Winners of the 2011 Earth Team Awards

Jackson, Miss., Jan. 11, 2012 – Government alone cannot conserve America’s natural resources, and that’s why the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) has enlisted an army of volunteers to help with conservation.

These volunteers, called Earth Team, have helped spread the good news of conservation in Mississippi and across the U.S.

Earth Team volunteers in Mississippi donated nearly 10,000 hours of service in 2011, and several volunteers were honored for their service. The state had more than 500 volunteers, and the value of their work totals \$204,340.

“We are grateful for the hard work and dedication of our Earth Team volunteers,” Earth Team State Volunteer Coordinator Kathy Respass said. “Volunteers have helped improve the landscape across Mississippi and assisted our agency in promoting the conservation of our precious natural resources.”

Winners of the 2011 Earth Team Awards include:

Sandy Evans, Individual Volunteer Award: Evans is a volunteer and valuable asset of the Metcalfe Soil Survey Office. He assisted the soil survey staff with soil sampling projects for benchmark soils, rapid Carbon Assessment and archeological investigations throughout the major land resource area. He brings a fresh, practical perspective to his work that helps the Metcalfe Soil Survey staff to do the best job possible for their clients. Tasks include operating the backhoe for large soil pit investigations, digging holes by hand for other projects, taking the soil samples for specific lab measurements and learning how to describe soil profiles in the landscape.

Hinds County Earth Team, Group Volunteer Award: This group is phenomenal, taking on many projects in their community. Two unique first time events included the grand opening of the Children’s Museum in Jackson and the “Read Across America” program with Jackson Public Schools. In the “Read Across America” program Earth Team Volunteers brought together two key building blocks to help build the future- reading and conservation. They read Dr. Seuss’s “The Lorax,” one of the best conservation books for children and adults.

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Jones County Earth Team, NACD/NRCS Earth Team Award: The Earth Team Volunteers in Jones County have been assisting for over 12 years. They are stronger now than ever and the assistance they provide is direct reflection on their personal commitment to conserve our natural resources. This year, this group donated over 1,300 hours of their personal time to work on projects. This group's members spread the word about NRCS programs to their neighbors, friends, and community members. This group has 29 members, who take pride in what they are doing and are confident they are making a positive contribution to our environment. Volunteers in Jones County survey and test pond sites, participate in field days, seminars and meeting, help with tours for elected officials, help with tree planting week, conduct Arbor Day presentations and other duties.

Keep the Rez Beautiful, RC&D/NRCS Award: This new volunteer group works to improve the watershed of the Ross Barnett Reservoir. Major tasks included the promotion of best management practices, dissemination of NRCS literature, cleanup of litter and collaboration with local officials to reduce waste and increase recycling. Volunteers are also developing a green space, providing local teachers with environmental education resources and changing behavior of reservoir stakeholders.

Coahoma County Extension Service, Chief's Field Award: The Coahoma County Extension Service staff hosted the Conservation Teachers workshop and a member of the staff served as one of the program presenters. The Staff assisted with the Coahoma County SWCD annual Field Day as they have done for more than 12 years. Other joint projects between the Field Office and the Coahoma County Extension Service included the annual tree give-away, the SWCD Poster Contest and the Farm Safety Day. Working together the agencies have meshed their talents and training to enhance the conservation efforts in Coahoma County.

Paul Rodrigue, NRCS Employee Award: Paul Rodrigue is an exceptional volunteer. He is a wonderful teacher, who is respected by all and accomplishing much in the arena of conservation education. His artistic wife is also an Earth Team Volunteer, so, together they demonstrate much creativity and originality in their conservation education programs presented to children as well as adults. He conducts educational seminars on pollination at the Great Delta Bear Affair held in Onward, Miss. This connection from one great conservationist to another provides a unique experience deriving from a volunteer's efforts.

Ondine Rudolph, Volunteer Coordinator Award: Ondine Rudolph is the area volunteer coordinator for 24 counties in southern Mississippi. She spends countless hours helping Earth Team volunteers. Events include tree planting seminars, tree giveaways, cogon grass workshops, Envirothon training, People's Garden Initiative, educational stops at conservation field days, poster and essay contests and other tasks and initiatives. She works tirelessly at recognizing the Volunteers and the work they provide to NRCS.

Two Mississippi award winners also received regional awards. Hinds County Earth Team and Ondine Rudolph garnered regional Earth Team awards in their categories.

Additionally, almost half of the state's field offices register Earth Team volunteers.

"I am proud of the hard work of our Earth Team volunteers, especially the NRCS employees who work diligently with these volunteers," Acting State Conservationist Al Garner said. "I want to thank our area volunteer coordinators, Ondine Rudolph, Nancy Melancon, Julie Kent and Rhonda Goolsby, and our state volunteer coordinator, Kathy Respass. We look forward to additional successes in 2012."

Find more on Earth Team at www.ms.nrcs.usda.gov/volunteers.html.